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Fevronia M. Van Sickle
St. Mary's Academy

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The Reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev and Their Effect on the USSR

Fevronia Van Sickle

PSU History 102, Block 1

Over the course of the 20th century, the political ideology of communism spread throughout Eastern Europe. The successive early 20th century leadership of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—prominently being Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev—all used communism to enforce governance and safeguard against national demise. Soviet socialism, founded on Marxist communism, soon departed from its Marxist foundation and morphed into a party-state that contradicted the very principles of communist ideology. Throughout the Cold War, this modified communism stood as the hallmark of the Soviet Union— one that separated US allies from Russian allies. However, late 20th century USSR, largely due to the influence of Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), fell away from socialism and instead turned to capitalism and a more democratic form of leadership. Influencing communist Russia through his more liberal policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Mikhail Gorbachev upset the balance of Russian politics and threatened military power by weakening the control and influence of the CPSU. As a result of this power struggle, a coup ensued on August 21, 1991 and the Soviet Union collapsed shortly after. Due to the Soviets’ creation of a socialist party-state that contradicted Marxist ideology, Gorbachev’s liberalizing attempts to democratize the union through his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* proved incompatible with the continuation of Soviet governance, and thus led to the downfall of the Soviet regime.

The Soviet Union formally came into being on January 1st, 1924. Founded on the basis of communism rather than nationality, the coalition of republics eventually grew to incorporate many Eastern European countries.¹ Uprisings headed by Vladimir Lenin in 1917 against the

¹ *Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Place Names*, 6th ed. (2020), s.v. “Soviet Union.”

post-Tsar government ended with the nationalization and redistribution of private industry and agriculture. Finding inspiration in Marxist communism for his Revolution, Lenin carried a revolutionary form of communism with him to his later tenure as Soviet Premier. Communism is a political ideology that argues for a classless, state-less society, in which there is no private property: all means of production are controlled by the proletariat (the working class), and each person gets payed according to their ability and needs.² Solidified by victory after the Russian civil war, revolutionary communism soon became a permanent Eastern European ideology, and the foundation for the Soviet Union's governance. Under Soviet Premier Lenin's leadership, the communism of the USSR turned from traditional Marxist communism into Marxism-Leninism, a socialist ideology. Two main principles defined Marxism-Leninism: strict adherence to the party, and democracy only within the party. Lenin headed a dictatorship of the proletariat; a governance on behalf of the working class which consisted of a small, select group of what Lenin deemed, "elite" proletariats. However, after Lenin died, his 1924 successor, Joseph Stalin, changed much of Marxism-Leninism and created his own brand of socialism, which became known as Stalinism. Stalinism, a variant of Marxism-Leninism, had three main principles: dialectical materialism, a cult of personality—which spelled the end for intraparty democracy—, and the idea of "socialism in one country."³ Stalinism, harsh and ruthless, forced rapid industrialization through violent means and caused famine and death.⁴ Stalin's two most notable successors, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, both started out with plans to liberalize the

² Encyclopedia Britannica, (2017), s.v. "Communism," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/communism>.

³ Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Communism."

⁴ Ibid.

USSR and depart from Stalinism, but Khrushchev left office and Brezhnev failed. The three leaders that directly followed Khrushchev, “stifled reform and attempted to impose a modified version of Stalinism.”⁵ This love of Stalinism and aversion to reform led to decades of ineffective reforms resulting in growing corruption within both the party and the Union. By the time Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985, the USSR was in the midst of an economic disaster and in dire need of reform. Gorbachev created two main policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* to achieve reform. Glasnost was “a new willingness to tolerate dissident opinions,” and perestroika was “the comprehensive reform of the Soviet political and economic system.”⁶ Glasnost’s openness and perestroika’s restructuring became the tenets of Gorbachev’s reforms. His liberal attempts to democratize the Union were met with resistance, and ultimately heralded the end of the Union’s adherence to socialism.

Soviet socialism was a contradictory, imperfect reflection of communism. Marxism-Leninism, the communism of the Union, was actually socialism, and not socialism the way Marx intended. Marxist ideology called for the stage of communism to be a successor to the necessary development stage of capitalism, but the founder of the Union, Lenin, skipped this stage. Political scientist Valerie Bunce notes that, “absent from the Russian experience...was the development of private property...a rational bureaucracy, the rule of law, and an independent nobility.”⁷ The Russians never went through the stages of social and economic development

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Archie Brown, “Gorbachev, Mikhail,” in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (2 ed.), (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷ Valerie Bunce, “The Soviet Union under Gorbachev: Ending Stalinism and Ending the Cold War,” *International Journal* 46, no. 2 (1991): 239. doi:10.2307/40202859.

necessary to build a communist nation; they called for a communist abolishment of private property in a country with not enough private property to warrant such a call. Lenin took a mostly feudal nation at the beginning of the 20th century and engrained into it the ideology of one of the most progressive, advanced ways of social organization. Western socialists began to refer to communism as “actually existing socialism,” but as it was enacted, it only loosely resembled traditional communist ideology.⁸ The continuance of the USSR state most directly contradicted Marxism.

An inability to fulfill certain Marxist principles led to the installment of a corrupt party-state which set the nation up for future failure. In theory, when communism is enacted correctly, the state should wither away and leave in its place a state-less society, but the Soviet state could not die out due to pressure from outside enemies.⁹ Its existence defied the very tenets of the ideology it claimed to uphold, and led to the creation and prevalence of a party-state. Governing as a dictatorship of the proletariats, the CPSU represented ten percent of the working class, which in turn, made up only ten percent of the Soviet total population.¹⁰ The contradiction inherent in the existence of a socialist state, coupled with the presence of a dictatorship of a minority, required the CPSU to become a partocracy to stay in power. When Lenin abolished private property, the state seized and centrally managed all productive property, which, “...

⁸ George W. Breslauer, “Gorbachev on the Political Defensive,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, (Berkeley: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁹ Vladimir Bukovsky, “Will Gorbachev Reform the Soviet Union?” *Commentary* 3, no. 82 (September 1986): 20. <http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?>

¹⁰ Vladimir Bukovsky, “Will Gorbachev Reform the Soviet Union?” 20.

resulted in oligarchic and bureaucratic rule by the party, rather than by members of society.”¹¹

The party managed everything, from a planned economy in the economic sphere and one-party intraparty democracy in the political sphere, to eventually no democracy at all, not even within the party. The nation needed the party in order to function. From the moment of its inception, the CPSU ran the government to such a degree that there emerged two separate governments: the actual Soviet government, and a separate “shadow government” that ran the actual government and consisted of party members.¹² This double-structured form of governance became bigger and more powerful under Stalin. Soviet socialism, because of its deviation from Marxist communism into an all powerful, two-tiered partocracy, set the nation up for failure in later decades.

In action, the Soviet regime’s party-state necessitated reform due to its corruption and ineffectiveness. The double-structured nature of government, existing permanently in a state of conflict between Soviet interests and socialist interests, and powered by the CPSU’s ability to grant and deny power and positions without opposition, was almost impossible to reform. Members of government constantly had to compete with incompetent, but more powerful, party members. Specialist workers who knew how to complete their government jobs efficiently were overseen by less competent, less educated, proletariat political commissars from the CPSU, which bred resentment between government workers and party members.¹³ Stalin, by giving the party more autonomy, placed the party’s interests above those of the economy. Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, tried to place the economy before party, but he was ousted for upsetting the

¹¹ Breslauer, “Gorbachev on the Political Defensive.”

¹² Bukovsky, “Will Gorbachev Reform the Soviet Union?” 20.

¹³ Bukovsky, “Will Gorbachev Reform the Soviet Union?” 21.

status quo, and never succeeded. Brezhnev, Khrushchev's successor, started out with plans to liberalize, but ended up contributing most heavily to an increase in party corruption and economic turmoil.¹⁴ His Brezhnev doctrine, especially, led to inadequate attempts at reformation, and party corruption that in turn, led to a loss of party control.¹⁵ Brezhnev set the stage for Gorbachev's tenure in office by breeding corruption and ending in economic crisis, and correspondingly, Gorbachev inherited a corrupt, ineffective party-state in the process of losing control.¹⁶ The present economic crisis resulted from an ambitious foreign policy and the failure of Russia to undergo the developmental stages it skipped in its hurry to communism. In addition to this chaos Gorbachev found when he assumed office, the USSR's state socialism created such a dependence of the Soviet citizenry on their leaders that major reform could only come from above, from the leaders themselves.¹⁷ It was this pressure to "reform from above", caused by a contradictory state socialism, that forced Gorbachev to reform the Union.¹⁸ Thus, due to the actions of past leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev was in no position to refuse reform when he took office as General Secretary in 1985.

Gorbachev created reforms with the interest of the USSR in mind. Prior to Gorbachev, the USSR had three goals guiding it: economic and political-military competition with the West,

¹⁴ Valerie Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change: the Gorbachev Reforms in Historical Perspective," *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (1993): 113. www.jstor.org/stable/2706884.

¹⁵ Bunce, "The Soviet Union under Gorbachev: Ending Stalinism and Ending the Cold War," 224.

¹⁶ Bunce, "The Soviet Union under Gorbachev," 224.

¹⁷ Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change: the Gorbachev Reforms in Historical Perspective," 118.

¹⁸ Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change," 118.

a commitment to expanding the size and strength of the world socialist system, and isolation from the global capitalist economy.¹⁹ Following these goals created the crisis Gorbachev found himself in, one caused directly by bad government and an inefficient economy. Gorbachev knew well the flaws of the communist collective.²⁰ To amend the crisis, Gorbachev's agenda of reform consisted of making both government and economy more efficient.²¹ He introduced his policies of glasnost and perestroika in 1985.²² Gorbachev's policy of glasnost loosened the CPSU's hold on mainstream political thought by allowing new parties, dissenting views, and criticisms to be brought forward. Perestroika focused on deregulating and restructuring economics and politics. This included trying to fix the economic disarray handed to him by shifting from a command economy to a marketized, demand economy.²³ Perestroika, allowing for structural changes in the economy, enabled the beginning of capitalist markets and political reforms, like the creation of a new national legislature. In action, glasnost seemed to be quite liberating. It lifted many government restrictions on the press, and allowed for open criticism of the government and of government-sanctioned history. Under glasnost, Stalinism was condemned,²⁴ and there emerged

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931–)," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005).

²¹ Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change," 119.

²² "End of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's Six Tumultuous Years at Soviet Helm: [Chronology]," *New York Times*, Dec 26, 1991, <http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/newspapers/end-soviet-union-gorbachevs-six-tumultuous-years/docview/428307360/se-2?accountid=13265>.

²³ "Perestroika," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005).

²⁴ "Glasnost," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications).

a significant liberalization of politics.²⁵ Initially, glasnost and perestroika worked well together, because as Soviets became more vocal, calls for democracy increased, which led to restructuring.²⁶ In 1987, the Communist Party Central Planning Committee approved Gorbachev's plan to allow voters to choose candidates in local elections, and by 1989, the first free elections in over seventy years were held for the Congress of People's Deputies, the new national legislature.²⁷ In addition to increased democracy, perestroika relaxed trade restrictions, encouraged Western investment, and in 1988, allowed for the creation of limited co-operative business, which shifted many businesses to privatization.²⁸ In a more extreme reform, perestroika became the cause for talks of decentralization of the Soviet bloc, and for a potential coalition government. Perestroika and glasnost fundamentally changed the Soviet Union.

However, despite Gorbachev's best interests, the reforms failed to do what he intended. Glasnost and perestroika, though seemingly a symbiotic relationship, were incompatible with each other.²⁹ The CPSU, and by extension state socialism, relied on unquestioning obedience that disappeared under glasnost. In contrast, perestroika was a restructuring of state socialism and of the CPSU, and thus, needed the power and authority of the CPSU to work. Glasnost threatened

²⁵ Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change," 123.

²⁶ Bunce, "Domestic Reform and International Change," 124.

²⁷ "End of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's Six Tumultuous Years at Soviet Helm: [Chronology]," *New York Times*.

²⁸ "Perestroika," *History.com*, 14 Apr. 2010, www.history.com/topics/cold-war/perestroika-and-glasnost.

²⁹ Serge Schmemmann, "End of the Soviet Union; the Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies," *New York Times*, Dec 26, 1991, <http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/newspapers/end-soviet-union-state-born-dream-dies/docview/428301838/se-2?accountid=13265>.

party control, and perestroika could not exist or function without party control. In previous decades, under previous leadership, opposition would have been met harshly, but under perestroika and glasnost, the lobbies opposing Gorbachev's reforms—the military-industrial complex, the fuel-energy complex, and the agroindustrial complex—did not fear backlash, and resisted openly because of it.³⁰ Gorbachev reformed away his own influence, because by restructuring the USSR, he broke the systems giving him power. The more he reformed, the less influence he had to combat opposition. In allowing opposition to exist, glasnost attacked the ability of the USSR to govern. The power of the USSR of old lay in Stalinism, and glasnost condemned Stalinism; by attacking Stalinism, Gorbachev's policies hacked away at the bedrock of the nation. However, apart from the inability of glasnost and perestroika to work together, the reforms were generally ineffective, in part because of pushback from all sides. Perestroika had many consequences: shortages of goods, decline in civic order, and the eruption of ethnic rivalries. Perestroika's measures teetered constantly between being too weak, or too grand. When large changes succeeded, they usually had bad consequences, such as inflation.³¹ Reforms were criticized by the far right for being too radical, and by the left for taking too long and not being radical enough. Communist hard-liners tried to hold on to what power and influence they had, and radical reformers wanted to change the direction and pace of change. Opposition mounted, towards both the CPSU and the reforms. In the early months of 1991, strikes occurred frequently, forcing the government to grant some concessions, even outside of the CPSU. Boris Yeltsin, the president of Russia, granted striking miners the freedom of selling twenty percent of their profits

³⁰ Mark Harrison, review of *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR*, by Chris Miller, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.1086/698810>.

³¹ "Perestroika," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*.

on the free market. Other workers began wanting to sell their output for dollars.³² This increase in preference for a free market economy threatened party control over foreign-currency earnings, a main source of the party's power.³³ The proletariat, in whose name the CPSU governed, became dissatisfied and wanted the party removed from the workplace entirely.³⁴ A full 1.8 million members left the party in 1990, which dealt a hard blow to the party's influence. A poll in Kaliningrad in 1991 showed that sixty-two percent of local party members were indifferent to its policies, and only eight percent trusted the party without any reservation.³⁵ The party itself, in addition to the Soviet strikers and protesters, called for Gorbachev's resignation as party leader in an April 24th, 1991 party meeting, over opposition to a coalition government, and in blame for the economy. The backlash against reforms lessened party power significantly.

The undermining impact of Gorbachev's contradictory, ineffective reforms on the CPSU subsequently meant a loss of party control over the military. By 1991, the party had ceased to be a party in any ideological sense, instead clinging to its last vestiges of influence by remaining a source of power and privilege for its members.³⁶ The Soviet military provided the CPSU its final authority. The party depended more on the military-industrial complex for its power than on its members, and a looming break between the military and the party signaled an end the party's

³² "Gorbachev Bends to Survive," *The Economist* 319, no. 7704 (27 Apr. 1991). link.gale.com/apps/doc/A10657095/PROF?u=s1185784&sid=PROF&xid=a64c69dd.

³³ "Gorbachev Bends to Survive," *The Economist*.

³⁴ D. Stanglin and J. Corwin, "Communism's New Deal," *U.S. News & World Report* 111, no. 5 (July 29, 1991): 28. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9107291497&site=ehost-live>.

³⁵ D. Stanglin and J. Corwin, "Communism's New Deal," *U.S. News & World Report*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

security in this sense. In a survey conducted in 1991, more than sixty percent of midlevel officers wanted to remove the military from the party's influence.³⁷ As the party lost support and splintered, its hold on the military dwindled.

The final days of the Soviet Union point to Gorbachev's reforms being the catalyst of the coup, and thus, ultimately the end of the Soviet Union. In charge of a party split between support for, and opposition against, a decentralized government, Gorbachev could not win everybody's support. In March of 1991, a nationwide referendum voted to support Gorbachev's plan for a looser union, but six republics boycotted the vote, and anti-Kremlin initiatives took hold in many other republics.³⁸ The democracy encouraged by glasnost translated to a lessening of unity but, nonetheless, July of that year heralded a draft of a new union treaty. The treaty gave an unprecedented amount of federal power to the republics, and came close to creating a federation.³⁹ Gorbachev's support of the treaty pointed towards more decentralization of power, and the military did not want power to be decentralized any further than it already was. To prevent further centralization of power, the Soviet army, KGB, Ministry of Interior, and the rest of the military industry undertook a coup from August 18th to August 21st.⁴⁰ President Yeltsin condemned the coup and led successful, peaceful resistance efforts,⁴¹ but the damage had already been done. Party authority finally broke. A few months later, "measured against its own

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "End of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's Six Tumultuous Years at Soviet Helm: [Chronology]," *New York Times*.

³⁹ "Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931–)," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*.

⁴⁰ "Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931–)," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*.

⁴¹ "End of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's Six Tumultuous Years at Soviet Helm: [Chronology]," *New York Times*.

ambitions, the USSR died a monumental failure.”⁴² Built on the grandest of ideologies, but on the shakiest of foundations, the Soviet Union dissolved on December 25th, 1991.⁴³

The Soviet Union could not be reformed. Reforming the Union to align with Gorbachev’s goals led, in the end, to a transformation of the Union into a different entity, one no longer in accordance with its communist beginnings. The USSR’s state socialism required so many reforms to function efficiently without corruption that it changed entirely. Through his reforms, Gorbachev found himself trying to reform away the very essence of the USSR, and in the end he succeeded. Once perestroika got close to restructuring the state, glasnost swept in and dissolved the blind party obedience perestroika needed to build structure around. Glasnost and perestroika, though in conflict with each other, deeply conflicted with a state whose governance depended on an aversion to openness, and an inability to restructure itself. If the Soviets had not instituted state socialism, there would have been no state in need of restructuring, no state in need of liberalization or democratic efforts. Gorbachev’s reforms were doomed from the start, because there can be no reformation of a state built on contradiction and double-structured power struggles without overturning the state. In the end, however, though state socialism could not have survived much longer, it was Gorbachev’s restructuring of the party and of government, in tandem with his openness to criticism, that enabled the military to rise up in a coup and thus, end the Union. The short lived, abruptly ended, existence of the Soviet Union points towards larger implications of the impossibility of a stateless society to exist in the modern world, where it will

⁴² Serge Schmemmann, “End of the Soviet Union; the Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies,” *New York Times*.

⁴³ *Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Place Names*, 6th ed. (2020), s.v. “Soviet Union.”

always be surrounded by outside opposition presenting reasons for the continued existence of a state. In a post-Soviet world, perhaps openness towards dissent will always lead to democracy.

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